

Hearts in the Right Place

Matthew 25: 14-30

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 16th November 2008/ Pledge Dedication

We're talking about a whole lot of money here. Enormous sums of money. Not talents as we generally think of the word, not skills, not gifts, not hobbies or interests. That's not what Jesus is talking about in his parable of the talents. In Jesus' world, a *talent* was the term used for the wages of a day laborer (an ordinary worker, not poor, not rich) for twenty years. That's a lot of money. For someone in the first century, we're talking about all the money earned over half a lifetime.

In the parable, the master has eight talents worth of wealth and entrusts it all to three slaves, then leaves and says, take care of it. To one he entrusts five talents, to another two talents, and to another slave one talent. You know how it goes. The one with five talents left and traded up, yielding another five talents. The one with two talents did the same. And the one-talent man dug a hole in the ground and put his master's money there. After a long time the master returns to settle the estate accounts. The master is really pleased with one who hands over ten talents, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." The one who originally had two now presents four. "Well done, good and trustworthy slave." Well, you know what happens to the slave who dug a hole and returned exactly what was given to him. He ends up in outer darkness, weeping and gnashing his teeth.

Now, remember – please – this is a parable, which means it's a metaphor not to be taken literally. It's a teaching device Jesus uses to make a point, to shock us and wake us up, it's meant to disturb us, it's meant to be troubling. But not for the reasons you might think. If you focus upon the last verse – darkness and gnashing of teeth – that is, you might think Jesus is offering a morality tale: don't be like that foolish slave, because if you do, that's what will come of you, so be a good steward. If you focus there, you'll miss the point.

In the marvelous providence of God, it just so happens that this lectionary reading comes on a Sunday in which we present our 2009 pledge commitment to God's work here. This is about stewardship, but not as a threat. We find in this parable one of Jesus' strongest and most direct teachings on the use of money for the Christian. God really cares how we use our resources. We are all like the slaves in this text, the wealth we have received, our savings, pensions, and portfolios really doesn't belong to us; they've been entrusted to our care. Financial concerns cannot be divorced from spiritual concerns. So, we might think reading this story being a good steward is simply getting a good return on God's money.

But in Jesus' time that would have been unthinkable. He lived in a zero-sum economy. There was no stock market to invest in, there was no confidence in a growing economy, and there was no anticipation of growth beyond your socio-economic level. He lived in what is known as "Limited Good" world, where seeking more was actually morally wrong. Because the pie was limited and already distributed, an increase in the share of one meant a loss for someone else. Honorable people did not try to get more. Only the wealthy got wealthier, but they used

their slaves to do it. And usury, charging interest on loans, was also morally wrong, strictly forbidden by the Bible (Exodus 22: 24; Leviticus 25: 35-57; Deuteronomy 23: 20-21). If we followed that law our entire economy would crumble.¹

In Jesus' time, the most prudent thing to do with your money according the Mishna, a major work of Rabbinic Judaism, the normal thing to do with your money – was to dig a hole and bury it. That's where it would be safe. That's what they did in the ancient world. Did you read the story this week that a guy with a metal detector struck gold and silver when he uncovered a valuable cache of Celtic coins in a cornfield in Holland, from around 53 B. C. , worth about \$220,000. They were placed in a hole to hide them from the conquering Romans no doubt. On Friday morning, I was listening to someone on MSNBC giving financial advice to us during these times of economic woes. He said, go dig a hole in your backyard and put your money there. That was perhaps a little alarmist, but it's interesting how it reflects what the slave did in this parable. The servant with the one talent did what any noble person would have done. It was the normal, appropriate response. He wasn't being stingy or greedy.

This is what's so shocking about this parable. You could imagine the distress he must have felt. "The Mishna say dig a hole and bury it, so I dug a hole!" When the Master returns and rewards the others who from the conventional, even religious standards of Jesus' time were foolish, we see something new is up. Tables are now turned and his world turned upside down. Jesus' Kingdom requires *unconventionality* – the conventional way is not good enough. The safe way is not always God's way. Although Jesus is talking about money here, this parable, coming late in Matthew's Gospel, is really a statement against the Scribes and Pharisees, the one-talent-slaves reluctant, resistant to the change Jesus was bringing. They wanted to keep things in place, ever for the *status quo*. "Any change, any development, any alteration, anything new was anathema to them."² They wanted to keep things in place, take no risks, play it safe and they did so thinking they were being faithful to Yahweh, when in reality they were erecting barriers to the advance of the kingdom; it's a case when fidelity turns out to be faithlessness. The Gospel is a high-risk venture. Kingdom life is about adventure. Playing it safe or caution is not necessarily a Christian virtue.

The deep ironic message of this parable is that it is possible to limit the reach of the gospel, curtail the kingdom, and hinder the ministry of a church through too much fiscal responsibility. This sounds so irrational and counter-intuitive (but that's what the Kingdom is like), that's what the five and two-talent slaves were like. Sure, we have to be good stewards and not be foolish, but this doesn't mean we avoid every risk and never take chances. Churches are not banks. Our goal is not to save, but to spend, to share. Too much saving creates congregations that are tentative, cautious, even avoiding risks because preserving capital becomes the central focus. *When churches function this way, large red flags of warning should go up because the soul of the church is at risk.* Michael Durall has written widely on money in the church; from his vast experience working with many congregations he observes, "Churches

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 149-150.

² William Barclay, *Daily Bible Study Series: New Testament Commentary – The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 357.

seldom die of taking risks. They often die of security – not instantly, but eventually.” Healthy churches take risks, they’re not concerned about security, always looking inward, holding on, digging a hole and living in it. Church growth guru, Bill Easum suggests this is one of the key Laws of Congregational Life, “Churches, like people, are healthiest when they reach out to others rather than worry about themselves. Churches grow because they intentionally reach out; churches die because they dwell on their own internal problems.”³

The story is told of a minister who, to show his reliance on God, entered the pulpit trusting that God would tell him what to say, without preparing for the sermon, without writing it out. After his prayer for guidance on Sunday, he waited expectantly – and God spoke to him and said – “You’re lazy.”

That’s what the master called the one-talent slave – lazy, and wicked. Because he was unwilling to take the risks the master requires. “Good and faithful” stewards exercise active responsibility that takes initiative and risk. That’s what Jesus is asking of us, every one us, day after day.

But how do we take those risks? What if you’re afraid and generally risk-aversed? That’s what the one-talent slave was. He was afraid. And with this statement we go even deeper into the parable to see what’s also going on in this story. When the master says why were you so lazy, what was his excuse? “Master, I knew that you were a *harsh man*, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was *afraid*, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” Why is he afraid? Because he says the master is harsh. But how does he know? The other two don’t see the Master that way, do they? Maybe that was his experience with the master. But the master said, if that is how you see me, demanding much, then why didn’t you work my money?

You see, what’s underneath this parable is this extremely important notion: *God cares about how we share our resources. How we share what’s been given to us ultimately depends upon our image of God, which is really what this parable is about.* You better make sure your image of God is correct. If our image of God is wrong – and it is possible to have the wrong image of God – then our lives will reflect that image. That’s why idolatry is such a serious sin, because we become the god that we worship, we take on the characteristics, attitudes, assumptions, and style of the god we worship. So we better make sure our image is correct, which is why theology and worship matter. Get the image right and it will be easier for us share what’s been given to us and connect our hearts with the One we treasure. The one-talent-slave has no desire to place his heart or entrust himself to such a harsh master. That’s not worth treasuring. But what we treasure will guide our hearts and ultimately, that’s what God is concerned about. Connecting treasure with hearts, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21).”

However, the one-talent man has an “evil eye, all he can see is darkness and the darkness is what finally engulfs him.” We reap what we sow. We get the God we worship. That’s the

³ Michael Durall, *Beyond the Collection Plate: Overcoming Obstacles to Faithful Giving*. Foreword by Thomas G. Bandy (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 86-89.

tragedy here for this man and ultimately for us when we choose like him. “The tragic news of this parable is that the one-talent man pronounces his own judgment; he gets only the master his tiny and warped vision can see. In theological terms, he gets the peevish little tyrant god he believes in. The story is not about the generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; it is about living with the consequences of one’s own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace in life and can discover the joy of God’s providence everywhere. But to be a child of the generous, gracious, and life-giving God and, nonetheless, to insist upon viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear provoking is to live a life that is tragically impoverished.” As Tom Long puts it so well, “There is a kind of theological economy at work. For those who live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous, they find more and more of that generosity; but for those who run and hide under the bed from a bad, mean, and scolding God, they condemn themselves to a life under the bed, alone, quivering in needless fear.”⁴

That’s not the life Jesus wants for you or for me. And it’s not the life we really want. So much comes down to our doctrine of God. I’ve seen so much damage done in churches and the psyches of God’s people by the destructive power of a harsh, cruel, demanding, fear-provoking image of God. I’m not sure how it emerges – maybe a childish, moralizing reading of scripture that doesn’t mature with adulthood, the inability to see the image of God through the life of Jesus. How do you see God? What’s the source of your image? Is it informed by the face of Jesus Christ? A God filled with grace and generosity?

An image of a generous God yields generous hearts, hearts grateful for the love received from God’s abundance.⁵ That’s an image of God to treasure, value, honor, worship, and serve. Because we don’t have to be afraid, we’re free to put our hearts in the right place. And God is concerned about our hearts – that which what allows our hearts to be whole, confident, and joyful, fulfilled and giving life. When our image of God is right, our lives show it with acts of grace and generosity.

It’s within this context that we offer our financial gifts to the church of Jesus Christ. This is going to be a challenging year for us, given the economy. People are scared and wanting security – understandably so. But I’m hopefully and confident, maybe foolishly, irrationally so – but so be it – because I know the dangers when we give over to fear and search for security. We have to acknowledge these and then go deeper than the fear, deeper than the drive for security, and focus upon God and the deepest desires of our hearts to be found in the joy of the Lord. We only discover the joy of living a generous life because we know the generosity of God. How we share – freely, extravagantly share – what we’ve been given is contingent upon our experience

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 383.

⁵ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: “God is a God of abundance, not a god of scarcity. ... God doesn’t give us just enough. God gives us more than enough: more bread and fish than we can eat, more love than we dared to ask for. God is a generous giver, but we can only see and enjoy God’s generosity when we love God with all of our hearts, minds, and strength. As long as we say, ‘I will love you, God, but first show me your generosity,’ we will remain distant from God and unable to experience what God truly wants to give us, which is life and life in abundance.” Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) on abundance.

sharing in the love of Christ. What we give to this church speaks volumes about the God we say we believe and trust.

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